

VZCZCXRO6182
RR RUEHLN RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHDBU #0774/01 1630726
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 110726Z JUN 08
FM AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0643
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 0181
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 0152
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 0121

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 DUSHANBE 000774

SIPDIS
SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR SCA/PPD JKAMP AND IIP LSCHWARTZ, BDURANT

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [KPAO](#) [CVIS](#) [CASC](#) [TI](#)

SUBJECT: TOURISM IN TAJIKISTAN: COME EXPERIENCE OUR BEAUTIFUL
MOUNTAINS, FRIENDLY PEOPLE, DIFFICULT BUREAUCRACY

Ref: A) Dushanbe 458, B) Dushanbe 748

11. (U) Sensitive But Unclassified - Not for Internet Distribution.

12. (SBU) Summary. Tajikistan has the essential attributes to compete for international tourism, but an unfriendly visa policy and lack of international air connections shut out foreign visitors and their ready cash, according to tourism expert Thomas Tait. During his visit May 26-30, Tait recommended the government establish an official website for tourists, ease visa requirements for friendly countries, and establish an inter-agency council to formulate tourism policy. Tajikistan's tourism committee has drafted an action plan to stimulate tourism, but it remains to be seen if the government is willing to take the crucial first steps toward recognizing that promoting tourism is a way to diversify and revive a struggling economy. End summary.

Economic Opportunity Thwarted by Visa Restrictions

13. (U) Tajikistan has the essential attributes to compete for international tourism -- a rich cultural and historical heritage, spectacular scenery, mountain sports, and genuinely warm and welcoming people. The country could reap a seven fold economic impact from each somoni a tourist spends here, but the government's unfriendly visa policy and lack of international air connections ensures that only the most determined travelers ever manage to visit. Thus Thomas Tait, Nevada's tourism commissioner for 13 years and the current president of the Nevada Tourism Alliance, assessed Tajikistan's tourism potential in meetings with private tourism operators, international donors, and government officials during his IIP-sponsored visit May 26-30.

14. (U) Tait previously met Tajik tourism experts and government representatives who traveled to Reno on Community Connections and Open World exchange programs regarding tourism in 2006 and 2007 respectively. Having served as tourism commissioner in a state that derives \$35 billion a year from tourism, he knows the business and is well qualified to offer candid advice on how to stimulate this industry.

15. (U) In meetings and press appearances alike, Tait warmly praised the open hearted Tajik people and reproached the government for its "unfriendly" attitude toward visitors reflected in the visa regime and its failure to provide essential travel information to potential visitors. An official in the Foreign Ministry's consular department noted in a meeting with Tait that Tajikistan could not extend the period of validity or offer multiple entry visas until the ministry had the funds to implement machine readable visas. This obstacle could put visa reform out of reach for the foreseeable future.

An Expert's Practical Advice . . .

¶6. (U) Tait said that tourism is the fastest way to move an economy forward, since infrastructure improvements made to attract visitors provide jobs and leave lasting benefits to local residents and businesses. He advised the government to take the following immediate and longer term steps to stimulate tourism and begin accruing the economic benefits.

-- Create an official website with visa, travel, and hotel information, since 94% of the traveling public uses the Internet, 78% use it to book their travel, and 50% use it to book their hotels.

-- Ease visa restrictions for visitors from "friendly" nations,
Q-- Ease visa restrictions for visitors from "friendly" nations, using the U.S. Visa Waiver Program as a model.

-- Carve a separate tourism ministry from the current Committee on Youth, Sport, and Tourism.

-- Establish a tourism council with representatives from the ministries of foreign affairs, finance, economic development, transportation, culture, tourism, etc., to coordinate tourism friendly policies.

-- Establish a visitor bureau with participating members from government and private industry.

-- Establish airline connections with bordering countries and offer more frequent flights on established international routes (currently Istanbul, Moscow, St. Petersburg, Almaty, Bishkek, Dubai, and Urumchi).

DUSHANBE 00000774 002 OF 002

. . .Buried in Rambling Five Year Plan

¶8. (SBU) The Committee on Youth, Sport and Tourism made similar recommendations - in no discernible order - in its "Concept of Tourism Development in Tajikistan up to 2013," released coincidentally during Tait's visit. The committee acknowledged in its report that tourism can be a primary source of income, but the forecast for growth in this sector is only 3% annually. According to the report, 320,000 foreign citizens visited Tajikistan, but only 9,600 were tourists. The report notes that the government collected revenue through recreation usage fees, taxes from visas and registration permits, land and air transportation, and tour guide fees. "Extreme" mountain sports were the most popular recreational activities.

¶9. (SBU) In its 14-page plan the committee recommended the following actions:

-- Improve marketing by convening a working group with participating members from national media and ministries.

-- Simplify visa issuance procedures.

-- Provide a legal basis for cooperation among government, parliament, the national association of tourism operators, and international donors in developing tourism.

-- Establish an inter-agency commission to coordinate actions of government entities involved in tourism.

-- Allocate a line item in the national budget to develop tourism. (The report noted that the 270,000 somoni allocation for 2004-2009 - about \$79,000 - was inadequate).

-- Reduce taxation levies on tour operators.

-- Survey and catalog the country's most attractive tourism sites, then develop in priority order.

¶10. (SBU) Comment: Tait's observations confirmed that Tajikistan

does have the potential to develop a tourism industry that could have a major impact on the country's economy. The government's action plan is a first step at leveraging tourism potential, but the plan offers no priority of implementing its recommendations, the first of which should be visa reform. While the tourism committee works out its elaborate plan to build tourism, community based tourism requiring little capital investment is already showing promise. A self-sustaining eco-tourism association founded with donor assistance markets Tajik hospitality in yurts and traditional style Tajik homes in the spectacular Pamir Mountains. But even this opportunity is snarled by regulations requiring all visitors to get a special passport stamp for the area, which can now be obtained in Tajik embassies and consulates abroad.

¶11. (SBU) Comment continued: Tait's visit was an opportunity to comprehensively look at the potential for tourism to contribute to Tajikistan's economy. His meeting with working level international organizations was the first time that donors discussed the practical and political challenges to the sector. Tait's visit also set the stage for a meeting of the Principals' Group (Ambassadors of donor missions and international financial organizations representatives) on June 5, during which participants discussed how to get the government to relax restrictions on visas and permits and expand airline connections.

¶12. (SBU) Comment continued: International donors and private tour operators believe the government could take some small steps right now that could have significant economic impacts. Unfortunately, they do not think the government sees the potential benefit of Qthey do not think the government sees the potential benefit of developing the tourism market, nor is it willing to make the investments that are necessary to broaden its economy. A number of smaller initiatives undertaken by international donors to help the country promote tourism should be better coordinated, perhaps under the leadership of one of the international financial institutions. End comment.

Jacobson